



Inside Story Americas

Myanmar: What is in it for the US?

As US officials visit, we ask if progress is underway or if Myanmar's president is the public face of the old junta.

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There has been a flurry of recent visits to Myanmar by Western governments offering more development assistance. The US says it now wants to restore full diplomatic relations with the nation following its recent reforms.

"They haven't changed anything yet, but they saw the Arab Spring happening in the Middle East - peaceful protests on the street calling for the regime to change So the Burmese government does not want people coming [on]to [the] streets calling for positive change. If people

come they will have to shoot and kill them as they did before."

- Aung Din, the co-founder of the US Campaign for Burma

Mitch McConnell, the top Republican politician in the US senate, is in Myanmar. He met with pro-democracy leader Aung San Suu Kyi on Monday and then with President Thein Sein, on Tuesday.

McConnell said: "We also look forward to a free and fair election, a by-election on April 1, and in the wake of that I think it would be appropriate for us to further consider, in the United States, the various sanctions that we have in place and the appropriateness of continuing those."

His visit follows US Secretary of State Hilary Clinton's visit last month to the country.

It marks a new engagement with the nation. For nearly two decades, since the regime's brutal crackdown on the 1988 pro-democracy demonstrations and its refusal to honour the 1990 election results, the US has attempted to isolate Myanmar, imposing tough sanctions.

In November 2010, an election took place which led to a nominally civilian government. But its ranks are filled with former generals including President Thein Sein. And in recent months, the new regime has begun a series of reforms.

"There is also geopolitics. China has had a very strong political and military relationship with Burma [Myanmar] and that is something that concerns this [US] administration ... If you actually get changes in Burma, you might get economic opportunities, get improved human rights, and you suddenly get an engagement that helps reduce Chinese influence - that sounds like a pretty good deal I think to the people in the state department and the White House."

- Doug Bandow, a senior fellow at the CATO Institute

First of all, the government began dialogue with Aung San Suu Kyi, who had spent 22 years under house arrest until her release in November 2010.

Ethnic minorities make up 40 per cent of Myanmar's population and they have been demanding either independence or regional autonomy from the Burman-dominated government for decades.

And the government is now pursuing peace deals with ethnic minority rebels. According to officials, the military was told to halt all offensives in ethnic minority conflict zones, on Tuesday.

As part of the reforms that have led the US administration to order the restoration of full diplomatic ties with Myanmar, the government has also pardoned hundreds of imprisoned dissidents. Around 200 political prisoners were released last Friday.

That step that was hailed by Hillary Clinton, who said: "... The United States will meet action with

action. Based on the steps taken so far, we will now begin. In consultation with members of congress and at the direction of President Obama, we will start the process of exchanging ambassadors with Burma [Myanmar]. We will identify a candidate to serve as US ambassador to represent the United States government and our broader efforts to strengthen and deepen our ties with both the people and the government."

On this episode of *Inside Story Americas* we ask: Why is the US reaching out to Myanmar and what does it stand to gain from doing so? And is Myanmar's president committed to meaningful progress or is he simply serving as the public face of the old junta in its quest to retain power?

To discuss this we are joined by: Kyaw Win, who was the second most senior diplomat in the Myanmar embassy in Washington DC but defected in July 2011 and has since been granted political asylum in the US; Doug Bandow from the CATO Institute and; Aung Din, the co-founder of the US Campaign for Burma - an organisation which promotes human rights and campaigns to bring an end to the military dictatorship.

During her meeting with Aung San Suu Kyi last December, Hillary Clinton said this about US objectives in Myanmar:

"Democracy is the goal. That has been the goal from the very beginning. And yet we know that it has been a long, very difficult path that has been followed. We do see openings today."

And the Burmese pro-democracy leader said:

"Before we decide what steps to take, we have to find out what our greatest needs are, and of course, two of the greatest needs in this country are rule of law and a cessation to a civil war. All hostilities must cease within this country as soon as possible."

Myanmar economy

Myanmar has huge amounts of untapped natural resources - including oil and gas, minerals, gems and timber.

- **Oil pipeline deal** - In 2010, Myanmar and China agreed on a pipeline worth \$2bn to ship oil and gas to China from the Bay of Bengal.
- **Rare Earths** - South Korea has struck a deal to develop mineral resources including rare-earths - which are vital to many hi-tech products. Japan too is seeking a similar deal.
- **Cheap Labour** - Labour costs being less than one-fifth of those in China or Thailand, could attract US investment in, for example, garment factories.